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ISSUE NO. 64 • NORTHEASTERN, CONNECTICUT



DOWNTOWN MAP INSIDE • OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2019

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Martha's Herbary, Pomfret, CT

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INSIDE:

Local Advertisers...Downtown Putnam Events including: **The Great Pumpkin Festival, Trick-or-Treat Street, and the Holiday Dazzle Light Parade...**This issue of the **Putnam Traveler** features...**Garden Gate Florist...**serving northeastern Connecticut for 31 years! Garden Gate has moved to a new location in Pomfret Center and they are excited for our readers to come visit! **Rude Dog Boxing...**we stumbled upon this innovative business and could not help but want to tell their story...Paul Ianuzzi and his wife Jill have turned their boxing club into a place of healing for those with Parkinson's Disease...it's an inspiring story! **Walk-tober into Putnam's Past The Cady-Copp House and a History Walk...**featuring an indeapth

look at Putnam's history, The Cady-Copp House and so much more! **Martha's Herbary** is not just a shop or a tea room or a place to learn something new. It's all of these things... a celebration of creativity, life and love. It's an experience just to BE there, for any occasion or whatever reason...And **The Bradley Playhouse** has invitations for you—to take your seat for a live performance—to audition for a future show—to volunteer your time and talent—in short, to be the community in community theater...We hope you enjoy this issue of **The Putnam Traveler!** To learn more visit: discoverputnam.com, explorewoodstock.com, visitpomfret.com, visitnec.com. & thelastgreenvalley.org.

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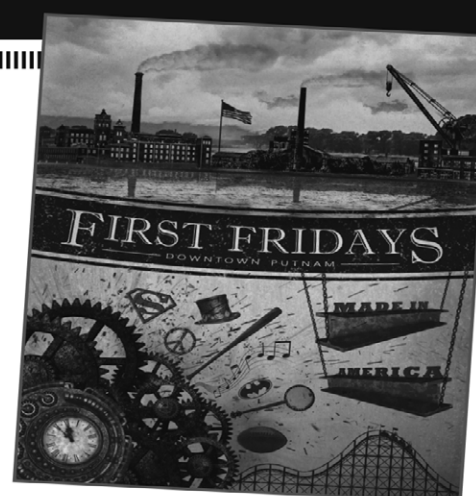
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Garden Gate Florist Moves to Pomfret after 31 Years!

Garden Gate may be the longest continuously operated woman-owned business in the area.

In 1988, Christine Durst and Alyson Hebert opened a florist shop in a local plaza. At the time, Christine’s daughter, Allison, was in the 8th grade. Now, as Allison Durst Britt assumes management of the business, her own daughter has just graduated from 8th grade. In the years between, the business has provided countless floral pieces to the area and beyond from a prominent building in nearby Woodstock. With the move to 30 Putnam Road, Pomfret, Allison is ready to maintain the practices that have made Garden Gate a success for thirty-one years, while also embracing new ideas that lend themselves to the new location.

BY NANCY P. WEISS



Photo by Jim Goodwin



Allison Britt, Photo by Nicole Bushey



Photo by Jim Goodwin

On a busy afternoon, I watched the three women at work in their renovated space assembling arrangements for a variety of upcoming weekend events. They moved around the sunny space like synchronized dancers, each choosing a bloom or a piece of foliage and adding it to the arrangement in front of them.

Allison joined the business in 1994, after completing her education. She noted that: “I began by working for my mother. Now she checks in with me. We have an unbelievably close relationship. It is nice having Alyson and my mom as partners. We support each other and it works very well.”

In addition to these three women, Garden Gate employs one full-time designer, a full-time counter person and a delivery driver. Flowers are delivered on a same-day basis throughout the area. Additional employees are added seasonally.

Allison has a vision for the new location in Pomfret. “It is exciting to be closer to Pomfret School and Rectory School. While we have always had good relationships with both, being closer geographically will increase traffic to the store. We hope that students, faculty and parents will drop by and pick up something special for themselves or their friends.” Garden Gate is an FTD florist, so arrangements seen online can be made for delivery, as well as discussing ideas and options directly with a staff member.

Even before the shop opened to the public, the florists were welcomed by neighboring Businesses: Hazelwood, Martha’s Herbarry and the Vanilla Bean Café. Plans are in the works to collaborate on various events. A lively ribbon cutting was held with Pomfret officials and members of Pomfret Proprietors, a group of local business owners, to welcome Garden Gate to the community.

The building the florist now occupies was previously used as a gas station, a pizza place, and a sign shop—all utilitarian uses with none of the charm that the Britt’s have created during their renovations. This work took longer than expected. But the building now as now an inviting retail florist with a sun-lit front room filled with plants and home décor items, the counter area with a cooler for floral bouquets designed for drop-in purchases, and a generous workspace where the creativity happens. A customer can easily choose a hostess gift or a centerpiece for a dinner party or grab a bunch of lively flowers just for fun. Fruit and gourmet baskets are also available.

In the holiday season, the modern barn behind the main shop will house a display of holiday greens and seasonal decor. Future plans include hands-on classes in floral design. School groups, civic organizations, garden clubs, and friends looking for something fun to do together will be able to create floral works in the space.

Garden Gate is especially noted for its wedding flowers. Through the years, the owners have created fresh, stylish floral pieces for celebrations from modest to elaborate and everything in between. In the new location, there is a cozy conference room where members of the wedding party can work with the staff to craft the image they want for their special occasion.

A fall open house provided an opportunity for customers to visit the new store and shop for autumnal décor, cards, and other fun etceteras. As has been the custom since the beginning, more than three decades ago, there will be a Christmas open house on the weekend after Thanksgiving, where Garden Gate’s signature holiday style, described as “natural forest and New England traditional” by Allison, will be on full display and ready for purchase. Garden Gate Florist is open six days a week. Weekday hours are 8:00 to 5:30 p.m., and Saturdays from 9:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Garden Gate is located at: 30 Putnam Road, Pomfret, CT. 860-928-0571
www.gardengatefloristct.com - @gardengatefloristct

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Life in Balance

RUDE DOG BOXING

Blood, sweat and tears. That’s what I expect from a boxing gym. Rude Dog Boxing Club delivers tears, but more often ones of joy not pain. Two banners hang outside the restored chicken coop in Brooklyn that houses the club. One reads, “The fight isn’t inside the ring, it’s inside the fighter.” The other, “HOPE: Never Stop Fighting.” These maxims have applied over the years to club owner Paul Ianuzzi’s boxing career and life. Now they now help shape his venture “Life in Balance,” a program he and his wife Jill developed that helps Parkinson’s patients dramatically improve their quality of life through physical, mental and social activities.

BY CRIS CADIZ

Paul started boxing 32 years ago at age 18, when he walked into a gym in the gritty town of Central Falls, RI, “with his book bag and tie” and got his ass kicked. “They annihilated me,” he recalls with self-deprecating laughter. “I was like, I’m done. I’m really terrible at this. But I was walking out the door and they said, ‘Hey, coming back tomorrow?’”

Young Paul didn’t get it until the coach told him, “When you got hit, you kept coming forward. I can teach you how to box. I can’t teach you how to come forward. You either have it or you don’t.” Paul returned to the gym the next day. Less than a month later his coach entered him in a Golden Gloves Tournament, which featured the best fighters in region. He won it 7 weeks later. Paul has experienced many wins in his boxing career, but it seems the ones outside the ropes have brought him the most satisfaction.

His route to Life in Balance was circuitous. Working with a surgical team in his 20s to help pay for college opened Paul’s eyes to medicine. He ran the autoclave, helped reposition patients, and assisted with other tasks in an operating room. Just out of college, he considered becoming a podiatrist—because he likes older people and knew he wouldn’t get an emergency call at 3AM—but eventually went into business. He started Rude Dog Boxing Club about 6 years ago to train fighters. He was also working with traumatic brain injury patients, in a home-care setting. “Despite working more than 60 hours a week, I thought I could do more,” he says.

Paul and Jill started researching Parkinson’s about 3 years ago when a family member was dealing with it. Famously suffered by actor Michael J. Fox and prize fighter Muhammed Ali, Parkinson’s is a disease of the central nervous system in which nerve cell damage in the brain leads to symptoms such as tremors, slow movement, stiffness, and loss of balance. Treatment with medication can lesson symptoms but the disease is progressive and incurable. Many patients who are



diagnosed feel like their lives are over. Many give up.

Being a fighter and trainer, Paul heard about Rock Steady Boxing, a non-profit program that teaches Parkinson’s patients to “fight back” against the disease with boxing drills. According to Rock Steady’s website, medical studies have shown that “rigorous exercise, emphasizing gross motor movement, balance, core strength, and rhythm, could favorably impact range of motion, flexibility, posture, gait, and activities of daily living.” While it is not a cure, this type of exercise seems to

help slow the progression of the disease. In short, the essential elements of a boxer’s training—strength, coordination, endurance and balance— correspond with the weaknesses of a Parkinson’s patient.

Paul appreciates how Rock Steady helps its patients, but likens the program to a Richard Simmons-style approach. “They have them hitting bags... That’s great. But it’s 30 people in a room with two instructors. We take that to the next level.”

Jill is also a boxing trainer and helps run Paul’s corner when he fights. Paul gives Jill a great deal of credit for their success. “My wife doesn’t stand behind me, she stands right next to me,” he says. “She set me in motion with my first client. She had more confidence in me than I did. She’s the one who said, “You researched the hell out of this. You got this.”

At Rude Dog Boxing, clients work in a program tailored to their needs. “It allows us to go from our diagnostic process to work on fixing problems. Clients are paired up with a buddy with similar symptoms,” Paul

explains. “The pair works together; they know they are not alone and can share successes too.”

The day I visit, clients (as Paul calls them—not patients) work in pairs and small groups throughout the gym. Many have an audience of sorts, family members or caregivers who socialize while they look on. Everyone is friendly and seems to know one another. The people I see don’t look like they are fighting for their lives, although they are. They seem to be having fun.

One woman—Kelly—is seated on a chair by a boxing bag, working with Jill. Several older gentlemen do footwork drills with an instructor’s assistance, stepping in deliberate patterns through red masking tape marks on the floor. Another pair of men work on a speed bag with surprising accuracy and strength. Paul and Jill have invented all their own drills. “We asked ourselves, if you had a balance problem, what would help? If you struggled with mental clarity, what would help?” said Paul. They kept at this inquiry and design process for more than two years, through countless hours at the kitchen table.

Paul has me try the Toy Soldier Drill. I fail mid-way. “They look simplistic but it helps us get an idea of where you are,” he explains. “For every client, we figure out what they can do, what they can’t do, figure out their patterns. Each person has different symptoms. And we offer a social experience that keeps them coming back.”

As we continue to talk, Paul notices Jill bring Kelly’s walker from across the room so she can leave. Firmly, but kindly, he asks Jill to return the walker to its original location and have Kelly walk without assistance to get it. Kelly moves, slow but steady, across the room to retrieve her walker. She smiles at us on her way out.

Paul points to a simple mural on the back wall, an outline in the shape of his young stepdaughter, who was happy model for it. Clients practice throwing a ball at the figure as another drill. The mottoes “Being great is a choice” and “Never stop fighting” also adorn the wall. “Kelly could not walk at all four weeks ago,” Paul tells me. “She couldn’t comb her hair. A month later she’s walking 180 feet around the gym. You know who did this? She did!”

He asks if I recall the Jim Carrey movie *Bruce Almighty*. “Be the miracle...” he says. “Sounds so corny but it’s true. Kelly is the miracle. She keeps trying and doing things the doctor tells her she can’t do. I feel like it’s us and our athletes against this disease,” he continues. “We don’t like losing. We get emotional when they win and when they have a

bad day. This is our passion.”

The Life in Balance Program at Rude Dog Boxing provides weekly workouts and highly personalized coaching for people with Parkinson’s. It features the benefits of individual attention, social interaction, and lots of positive thinking and experiences.

For more information, visit lifeinbalancerudedogboxing.com or call 860-771-1343.







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Walk-tober into Putnam’s Past

The Cady-Copp House and a History Walk

Putnam’s history has been in the spotlight recently with the publication of David McCullough’s recent book, *The Pioneers*. Visiting Ohio University to deliver a commencement address, his interest in the history of the Old Northwest was piqued. A building named for Manasseh Cutler, an author of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, prompted investigation of the settlement of southeastern Ohio. McCullough’s research journey included a visit to Putnam and the historical society’s Cady-Copp House, where Cutler received part of his education. The house now belongs to Putnam’s Aspinock Historical Society and is one of three locations where local history is celebrated.

BY CAROLINE SLOAT

When the Cady-Copp House was built, Putnam Heights was still part of Killingly, (and before that the region was named Aspinock). The date for the construction of the house is generally agreed upon as 1745, the year that the Reverend Perley Howe and his wife Damaris moved to Killingly where he would serve as the minister of the church on Putnam Heights. The house was built by Judge Joseph Cady for his daughter the wife of the Reverend Perley Howe of Dudley at the time of his call. After Howe died, Damaris married the Reverend Aaron Brown, who died in 1775, a year before his wife. Damaris had given title to the house to her son, Sampson Howe, in 1768. The house is remembered as a parsonage for two successive ministers of the nearby church, who tutored promising local students, among them Manasseh Cutler.

Despite his wealth, Judge Cady commissioned a modest building in terms of its size and construction. Indeed, it has been observed that the house is a conundrum. Perhaps the most striking elements of the house are the framing system and for their visual appeal, the center chimney with a corner fireplace in each room. Although it is a “cape,” the plan and the method of framing here cannot be traced to Cape Cod. A house in Upton, Mass., has a corner-fireplace plan and another house in Granby, Conn., has a similar floor plan, but it is a full two stories in height, unlike the gambrel roofed Cady-Copp House.

Three of the four fireplaces were modified around 1800, when the fireplaces were relined for greater economy in the use of wood. Only the fireplace in the room designated the hall was not rebuilt, but the chimney-breast has evidence of a hole cut for the pipe during the installation of a stove. This room has a dish cupboard with separate paneled doors built into the wall at the southeast corner. The first-floor rooms have similar finishes: plaster walls and ceilings, beaded-edge casing of posts and beams, and some plain horizontal board wainscot. An architectural survey reveals circular-saw marks on the lath used when the walls were refinished with a second layer of plaster, sometime after 1830. The windows of the west wall of the parlor retain some evidence of earlier plasterwork with split lath.

The house was given to the historical society in 1992. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places (NR) in 2001. The site includes the house and a late nineteenth-century barn. Survey work revealed the cellar holes of other outbuildings as well as pathways and walls that defined the site’s long agricultural history. In



preparation for installing a new drainage system around the building to draw rainwater away from the sills and foundation, a small area was selected for archaeological testing that took place in 2003-4. The areas for investigation were chosen to identify the presence of



buried artifacts or structural remains before completing a plan to remediate water damage. Patterns of historical use were revealed along with artifacts associated with various periods of occupancy that ended by about 1920.

Although only a limited area was established for testing, because it was so close to the house, it was rich in recovered artifacts, which reflect aspects of foodways, furniture, children’s activities, clothing and personal accessories. Ceramics for the table and food preparation made up about 15 percent of the retrieved material. Tobacco pipes have been well studied for their evolution

and the analysis of fragments found at this site sheds light on the chronology of the house. Members of the historical society were trained to clean the artifacts unearthed at the site.

The archaeology contract also included information sessions for the general public and for school groups, an effort that current volunteers are seeking to revive with a series of open houses. On

Saturday, October 5, from 10-11 a.m., the site will be open for a Walktober tour. The location of the house on Route 21—Liberty Highway—will be well marked.

It has been observed that, “while history has been kind to the Cady-Copp House, time has taken its toll.” A condition report written about twenty years ago pointed out the need to develop a restoration philosophy to address the obvious structural problems in the building. This report suggested that a “case could be made for repairing the structure, but leaving the interior intact, which, as it stands, has considerable value as material culture. ... A full-scale restoration of the finishes runs the risk of losing the somewhat ephemeral quality of great age now conveyed.”

This is where the historical society still finds itself. It recently launched its 2019-20 annual appeal with a photograph recording David McCullough’s visit to the Cady-Copp House. In *The Pioneers*, McCullough describes the role of Manasseh Cutler (1742-1823) in the formation and development of the Ohio Company and the settlement of Marietta on the Ohio River. The Northwest Ordinance outlawed slavery in the Northwest Territory and established among other things the way for settlements beyond the Allegheny Mountains to become states. The states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan were in this group. Cutler served in Congress from 1800 to 1804.

Funds raised by the Aspinock Historical Society will be used for both the Cady-Copp Cottage and the Boxcar Museum. The Gertrude Chandler Warner Boxcar Museum was not open in 2019. Repairs to the siding

Continued on page 8



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Photo of David McCullough taken by his son

turned out to be more extensive and complicated than anticipated, but when the museum reopens it will be fully accessible with a ramp replacing the stairs. In 2020, the Boxcar Museum is expected to return to its open schedule that runs from May to October.

The boxcar, adjacent to the rail line in downtown Putnam, celebrates the one-time Putnam librarian, Gertrude Chandler Warner. She published the first of her nineteen stories in 1942. The premise of the series is that four orphaned children find an abandoned boxcar, which initially serves as their home and after being reunited with their grandfather becomes their playhouse. The books have remained in print and now the series includes more than one hundred volumes. An animated movie was released in 2014 and five stories have been translated into Spanish. The continuing popularity of the series is testament to Warner’s skill as an author who understood children’s vocabulary and interests. The website www.boxcarchildren.com includes a teacher guide and curriculum that aligns with common core guidelines.

The third active location for the historical society is the Research Center at 208 School Street, which is open on the second and fourth Sunday afternoons of the month from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. The strength of the Society collections are genealogical and local history research.. Putnam newspapers and the town directories published from 1873 into the 1960s are among their unique and well-used resources. There is material on the Putnam villages, industry, railroads, and key events in the community, such as the 1955 flood and other disasters. The Society sponsors adult programs, school programs, and collaborates with other groups seeking historical information and pictures, such as the VFW’s recent World War II banners.

Bill Pearsall is the current president and Putnam’s Municipal Historian. In 2020 the collections will move into a dedicated space in the new Putnam Town Hall to be built at the corner of School Street and Woodstock Avenue and in preparation for this Pearsall has attended many meetings to represent the historical society. Pearsall will be leading a Putnam History Walk on Saturday October 25, from 1:00-3:30 p.m. The walk will provide beautiful views of Putnam and discussion of the impact of the river on the growth and development of Putnam’s mills and railroads..

THE MARTHA’S HERBARY EXPERIENCE

You can’t miss what’s special about Martha’s Herbarry. Creativity is absolutely everywhere! It wafts from lush gardens that border the historic house in Pomfret where this shop is located.

The air is scented by flower beds and fresh cut grass. It’s hard to move beyond the pathway to the door, as diversions abound: a rustic cart of lovingly selected pots of herbs, clever little signs, garden decorations. You must slow down to explore all the carefully curated details. The enchantment begins...

BY CRIS CADIZ

Michelle King greets me at the door. Although she is a friend, I know this is how she receives everyone. Her smile is genuinely welcoming; her dark eyes shine with warmth. I hug her, again distracted by eclectic displays of retail—splashes of color in clothing, art and jewelry hanging everywhere... home décor that’s fun, quirky, unique and often handmade by people who care about their craft. Just about every item I see, I want to buy, to wear, hang on my wall or lavish as a gift. “We try to do fair trade, handmade and local as much as we can,” says Michelle. “Some things are made overseas but I’m careful about sourcing retail. It matters to me where and how it was made.”

Michelle guides us to the kitchen where she makes tea for our interview. She serves it in lovely china teacups on an artistic metal tray. We chat at a small table in one of the four areas she uses for events. Each downstairs room in the 18th-century building is uniquely decorated, all with artistic flair. One is completely portable ... all of the furniture easily reconfigured or moved. “This is where our last wedding had their dancing,” she tells me.

Events are not new at Martha’s Herbarry. Original owner Martha Paul offered regular cooking and herbal classes, so experiences have always been a special feature. When Michelle took over the business in 2009, she continued the tradition. “We used to do small classes and things like little girls’ tea parties,” she recalls. “When we took over the entire building, we decided to do bigger events. About five years ago we became the Gathering Rooms and Gardens at Martha’s Herbarry. It’s still evolving.”

It certainly is. Michelle has expanded events to include holiday teas, private celebrations (small weddings and special occasion parties), plus art and music happenings and, most recently, wellness workshops and events. They have even held a jazz brunch, a summer concert and a few dinner parties, such as on Valentine’s Day.

“We also did a Murder Mystery dinner with local acting talent,” Michelle adds. “It was hysterical. We laughed so much.” The Gathering Spaces at Martha’s is able to host up to 50 people with wait staff. “Thirty-five is very comfortable,” says Michelle. Plus, guests can use the gardens and rent a tent.

Renee Berube grew up just down the street from Michelle. She was fast friends with Michelle’s younger brother and they all played together as kids. Renee is another woman whose passion has produced a successful business, Renee’s Working Girl Catering based in Putnam. Lucky for the Quiet Corner, Renee and Michelle have collaborated at Martha’s to offer delightful food and celebratory experiences.

“I knew the relationship I built with Michelle and her

family when I was a kid was special, but little did I know that so many years later she would be playing such an important part in my life,” says Renee. “The nature of my business is chaotic and hectic. When I get the honor of doing an event at Martha’s Herbarry, it’s the closest thing to R&R I could possibly have while still doing what I love.” Renee enjoys being in Michelle’s space and spending time with an incredible business woman. “Her creativity astounds me and always helps me to be creative too. The tea parties that we’ve collaborated on are so much fun and we’ve really put our own personal twists on them. These are not your usual tea parties!”



Michelle King, Photo by Norm Aubin



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Michelle feels likewise. “We’re like sisters, really,” she says. “I think of her as family. Renee is great to work with.” Renee’s Working Girl Catering is Martha’s exclusive in-house caterer for all their events. Currently, they hold teas about once a month for holidays. They would like to start a regular “Tea Tuesday” or something similar in the fall. According to Michelle, teas fill up fast and reservations are required.

There’s always a soup and salad course followed by tea sandwiches then dessert. Michelle serves at least two types of tea, one black and one herbal. “Renee does her own take on tea sandwiches—they are different and fun,” she says. “We keep it simple. But it’s different every time; you’ll never have the same menu. It’s magic, really. It’s so much fun.” Michelle loves creating the details of table scapes and mantel décor for events. “I don’t do any formal art...this is my art now.”

Michelle has flourished at Martha’s, bringing all her education, skills and talent to bear in what she offers guests and customers. She first studied human services and psychology, which led to working for ARC and with autistic children one-on-one. In her 30s, Michelle went back to school and “treated” herself to a degree in fine art. “That was for me,” she confesses. “My mom had passed away and I needed a change. But get a job as an artist?” She laughs at the thought and gestures around. “This is an extension of art for me.”

Owning and running a small retail business in the Quiet Corner is an extraordinary amount of work—much of which involves getting customers to visit and then to return. But Martha’s is an expression of Michelle’s creativity. “I do love it. It helps me be happy. If you can keep doing things you love, it’s worth it.” Her understanding of the struggle makes her big on small. She always tries to shop for her needs at local businesses first. And she is the only person I have ever met never to have used Amazon.com—ever!!!

Wellness experiences are the latest offering at



Martha’s. A recent herbal cleaning class taught attendees how to make five different cleaning products, such as furniture polish and wipes, all with natural ingredients like borax, essential oils and distilled water. Michelle also held a team building workshop for Rectory School that included an imaginative twist (what could be more fun than making cocktails with your colleagues!?). She was recently invited by Putnam Bank to offer an event for employees with the goal of team building plus self-care. “It will be a wellness workshop—take care of yourself first so you can do your job better and take care of others,” she explains. She would like to offer more like these. Something comfortable and not corporate—available at Martha’s or on-site at business locations.

Lately, Michelle has felt inspired to merge her passion for healthy lifestyles with a lifetime of experience to offer something she calls, for now, “Healthy but Human.” She envisions a workshop series that offers ideas, every day practices, some food and information but allows for flexibility and is non-judgmental. “We try to be really healthy,” she says. “But sometimes we have to do unhealthy things. It won’t end the world if you eat a piece of pie.” This Wellness Series would be offered on a weekend afternoon, probably twice a month and tailor it to attendees. “I have tons of ideas. We need to talk, women especially. We need that socialization. I want to use what I’ve learned but add my own twist.”

She also wants to offer more arts experiences—in addition to the current, popular twice-a-year Artisan Market—including having her friend teach a writing workshop. I want to bring all the arts here. “There are so many ideas rolling around in my head!” she exclaims.

AND, Michelle is now testing her own sideline cookie business, delicious snacks using diet-sensitive recipes. “These are for people who struggle to find sweets that taste good and don’t crumble like sawdust.” They are moist, paleo-friendly, vegan and grain free, made with nuts and maple syrup. “We don’t stop!” she laughs. “We just have to keep moving forward.”



While it’s sometimes hard to juggle being a business person and a mother, Michelle is grateful that she can offer a sense of peace, calm and well-being to those who visit Martha’s. “When you come here it does make you slow down. People can relax and be in the moment. We are so used to Amazon and instant gratification—getting exactly what you want on the next day. You need to let go of your expectations and just enjoy it,” she urges.

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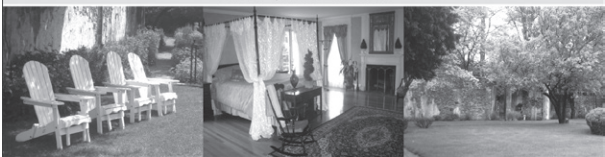
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IT’S LIVE ON STAGE AT the Bradley Playhouse

The Bradley Playhouse has invitations for you—to take your seat for a live performance—to audition for a future show—to volunteer your time and talent—in short, to be the community in community theater.

BY CAROLINE SLOAT

The 2019 Bradley season continues with a pair of Bradley shows, a comedy night, a musical in partnership with The Complex, a movie revival, and a haunting one-man show. October is a busy month. The Bradley traditionally produces a dramatic murder mystery and this year, *Deathtrap* will be performed for three weekends from Friday, October 4 through Sunday, October 20. For one evening, Wednesday, October 16, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* returns with storyteller Jonathan Kruk. The month wraps up with *Urinetown*, the fall show presented by The Complex (October 25, 26, 27). “There is more to come on the subject of movies,” says Gibbs. “But this fall, watch for a matinee screening of *Gone with the Wind* on Sunday, November 2, in observance of the eightieth anniversary of its premiere. The holiday show, *Miracle on 34th Street*, a musical will be performed for three weekends from December 6 through 22.

The comedy-thriller *Deathtrap* opened in New York in 1978 and soon became a resounding hit with a four-year run on Broadway followed by a 1982 movie. The story imagines the desperate measures that a formerly successful playwright takes to be able to reproduce his success. *Deathtrap* playwright Ira Levin has taken the basic components of thrillers and horror stories: murder, deceit, innocent dialogue with hidden sinister meanings, plot reversals, unexpected turns of events and twisted and rearranged the pieces.



Urinetown is a musical satire about a municipality of that name that has chosen to deal with the issue of water consumption by outlawing the use of public toilets and requiring that all must pay to use the facilities. This 2011 Broadway musical imagines that this is a revolutionary situation tackling such themes as hope and fear, capitalist greed, political corruption, and Malthusian catastrophes.

In December, the Bradley returns with a holiday classic, *Miracle on 34th Street*. A family show based on a novella and a movie, it centers on an old man who calls himself Kris Kringle filling in for an intoxicated Santa in Macy’s annual Thanksgiving Day parade. Kringle proves to be such a hit that he is soon appearing regularly at the New York store When Kringle surprises customers and employees alike by claiming that he really is Santa Claus, it leads to a court case to determine his mental

health and, more importantly, his authenticity. The venue for these productions is the Bradley Playhouse, a historic theater building that opened in 1901. Originally, a vaudeville house, movies were shown there for much of the twentieth century, until small-town movie theaters ceased to be viable. By 1984 a group of local residents who imagined presenting live theater on its stage established a community theater. Incorporated as the Theater of Northeast Connecticut (TNECT) in 1991, it achieved nonprofit status the following year. For more than thirty-five years, the theater has offered a year-round program of its own main stage productions as well as bringing in other shows. Recently the comedy nights presented by Scott Higgins four times a year have gained a following of their own. These shows are ticketed individually or with a laugh pass for the season.

The Bradley (TNECT) is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors. Don Gibbs is the current president. Gibbs, a teacher at Pomfret School, first became involved in theater by acting in faculty shows. “Our challenge at the Bradley is how to have that same kind of open invitation to perform,” he says. “How do members of the community come in to try out and work on a production?” Anyone who takes part in the process, of “building a show together, gets to know the people, and that’s what makes it work. It is really fun,” says Gibbs who has already performed in several Bradley shows and looks forward to auditioning again.

The board of directors is thinking hard about ways to diversify the pool of people who see a role for themselves in the theater. It’s not just about acting. “Working backstage on tech or costumes can make one feel just as good about hitting those marks.” The board is also aware of the importance of promoting the season. “The board is planning ahead in a more aggressive way,” notes Gibbs. The slate of shows is drawn up a year in advance to take advantage of the lead time in developing a marketing plan. Some shows are new to the community, and that’s for a reason. “Part of the challenge is finding a way to honor the ‘old chestnuts,’ yet staying contemporary and meaty for actors who are interested in performing in a variety of kinds of works.” In the 2019 season, *The Last Romance and Savannah Sipping Society* provided roles for actors who like to work on dramatic productions.

The lineup for the 2020 season is a reason to ask Santa to put a Bradley pass in your stocking. The productions will include *Boeing, Boeing* (January), *Agnes of God* (March), *Mamma Mia!* (April), *Matilda*



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(summer), *Night of the Living Dead* (October), and *Christmas Carol* (December). The musicals and the holiday show will each run for three weekends. The plays will have two-week runs. Gibbs says that “this schedule should help relieve the crunch caused by lack of offsite space for set building.” When Bradley productions are in rehearsal, there will be shows in front of the red curtain—while construction is in progress behind! This includes the four Scott Higgins comedy weekends that will be returning in 2020.

The Bradley operating budget is “razor-thin.” Because most of the Bradley productions are locally produced by volunteers, playgoers are not always aware of the expenses that are factored into ticket prices. When the Bradley Playhouse opened back in 1901 there were more than 900 seats, but occupancy is now

costumers are enjoying the recently refurbished costume area that now includes some workspace. Those special initiatives might be complete, but there are other big-ticket items that need funding. The Bradley is grateful to its donors and supporters.

“Our biggest challenges are marketing—expanding the audience by bringing in new people. We need to find new ways to close the gap between what patrons know and what they don’t know. about theater and its demands,” observed Gibbs. The Bradley has modified the calendar by scheduling auditions two weeks earlier. This will give time to produce the show and publicity that includes stories about the cast and the upcoming production. Look for additional promotion for *Miracle on 34th Street*. This production with its holiday message exemplifies how Bradley productions are a

shows. From 2018’s *Christmas Story*, the producers cast every child who tried out and no one was turned away.

By responding to periodic surveys, members have helped set the direction for the theater.. For example, the idea of booking tribute bands came from audience suggestions and has proven popular. Everyone liked *The Buddy Holly Story* and the tribute band that evolved out of the show is booked at the Big E this September. The Bradley is negotiating to bring them back for shows in Putnam. Another idea that came from audiences was to introduce reserved seating was also based on the analysis of data. Ticket holders no longer have to get to the theater as soon as it opens to stake out a seat. Instead, come into town on your own schedule, get parked and enjoy dinner, or coffee and dessert. Attracting 13,000 patrons over the year for its



capped at 400, so the best-case scenario is selling out that number. Gibbs explains that a community theater has “to deal with repair and replacement costs, in addition to the actual costs of mounting a production. For a musical there is a rehearsal pianist and the expense of live music for the three-week run. For *Shrek* the musicians’ stipends totaled \$8,000. (One of many reasons for the differential in pricing between plays and musicals.) We want our mix to include popular shows, but royalties are high for shows in high demand and have been rising in recent years, plus we must contract and pay for rights a year in advance.”

The Bradley has one full time employee, Monique Maldonado, the office manager, and a part-time bookkeeper. The books are more complex with the growing number of productions “and we need to be sure about what we are spending on shows and theater operation such as the heat, especially during months when we have no production. We would like to be able to fly more, as we did for *Wizard of Oz* and *Mary Poppins*.” It’s a win-win when Bradley supporters purchase season and flex passes, they benefit the theater and, based on individual ticket prices, get to see a “free show.”

TNECT reinvests any surplus from its productions but continues to have a lot of needs. One is to keep the space operational and clean. “Our goal is to keep it vintage, but not dated,” notes Gibbs. The Bradley has gradually been making improvements. The lighted street sign was the result of the generosity of theater members and other fundraising. Patrons are also appreciating the additional women’s rest rooms. The actors and

part of a bigger story about the community and in the community.

The Bradley is justly proud of the involvement of youth in its productions, supplementing opportunities available in local schools and at The Complex. By partnering with The Complex twice a year, a large number of their students have an opportunity to perform on a theater stage. The Bradley has offered its own summer theater camp for many years, as well as involving children in summer musicals and holiday

own productions, the theater has made a difference to downtown Putnam.

“At the end of the day the volunteers with the theater are mostly people who have full time employment,” Gibbs observes. Plans for developing additional volunteers will build on the success of the kids’ camps, with workshops and training opportunities for directors and theater tech. “Let’s face it: most of us who volunteer or are on the board want to keep it alive because periodically we’d like to be on stage.”

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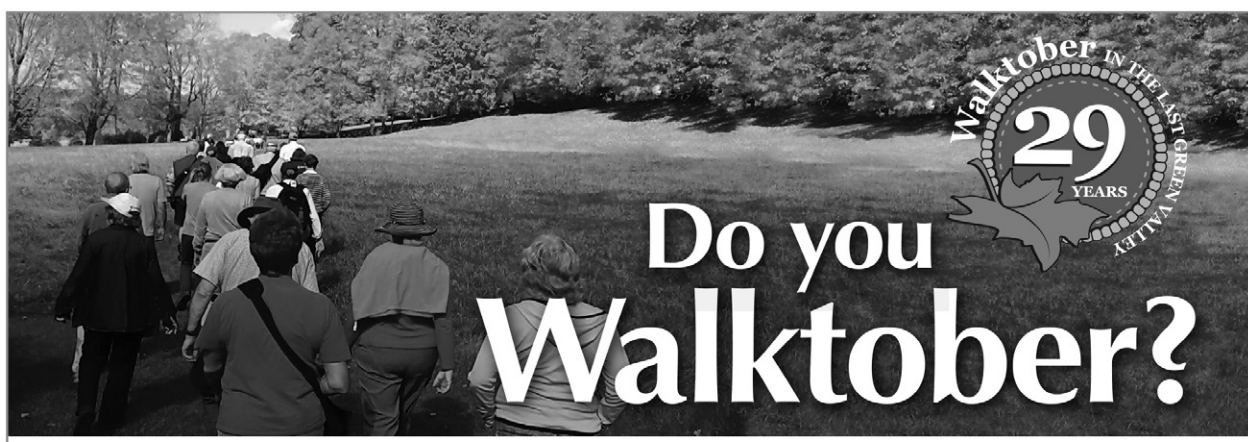
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